

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 999
February 24, 2006

Pulling Iraq Back from the Edge of Civil War

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The February 22 bombing of the Askariya shrine in Samarra, one of Iraq's holiest Shiite religious sites, has pushed Iraq to the brink of a civil war and dealt a major setback to U.S. efforts to build a stable democracy—just as it was intended to do. The bombing, which collapsed the golden dome of the mosque, ignited a firestorm of Shiite reprisals against Sunni targets. Over 100 Sunni mosques were subsequently attacked by enraged Shiite mobs seeking vengeance and more than 130 Iraqis were killed in sectarian clashes.

Although no group has claimed responsibility for the bombing, the Sunni extremist terrorist group Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia is the prime suspect because of its history of similar attacks against Shiite mosques and religious festivals. Diehard remnants of Saddam Hussein's regime also have a vested interest in making Iraq ungovernable. Iraq's Shiite leaders are growing increasingly frustrated with bloody attacks on their followers, and now are sure to threaten a harsh crackdown on the Sunni insurgency.

Shiite firebrand Moqtada al-Sadr blamed the U.S. for failing to protect the mosque. He incited his followers to seize Sunni mosques, ostensibly to protect them, while calling for reconciliation with Sunnis and offering himself as a broker for doing just that. His Iranian patron, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad piled on, blaming the United States and Israel: "These heinous acts are committed by a group of Zionists and occupiers that have failed. They have failed in the face of Islam's logic and justice."

Iran has an interest in keeping the Iraqi pot boiling and fanning the flames of sectarian conflict to undermine Shiite moderates such as Grand Ayatollah Sistani, who has played a restraining role. But even Sistani, who quietly has supported U.S. efforts to build a stable democracy, left the door open for a greater role for Shiite militias: "If the security agencies are unable to guarantee the necessary security, then the believers are able to do so with God's help."

To avert greater violence, Iraq's President Jalal Talabani summoned political leaders to a meeting the day after the bombing, but the biggest Sunni faction in the new parliament, the Iraqi Accordance Front, refused to attend, citing the attacks on Sunni mosques. It also has withdrawn from talks about possibly joining the new Iraqi government. This growing polarization greatly complicates and threatens to derail American efforts to encourage the formation of a broad-based Iraqi government that could co-opt moderate Sunni forces and take the wind out of the sails of the Sunni-dominated insurgency.

To broker the formation of a new government that would include greater numbers of Sunni leaders, the Bush Administration correctly had been

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/MiddleEast/wm999.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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pressuring the dominant Shiite parties to drop Interior Minister Bayan Jaber of the pro-Iran Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), who has been accused of condoning death squads and the torture of prisoners. U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad bluntly warned on February 20 that the U.S. would not continue to fund “forces led by people who are sectarian” — a clear reference to the Interior Minister.

But Shiite leaders, frustrated by the recent spasm of violence, argue that the U.S. is tying their hands in combating the insurgency. SCIRI leader Abdul Azziz al-Hakim went so far as to say that Khalilzad had given the insurgents a “green light” to attack the Samarra mosque. Now they are likely to use the bombing as a strong argument for continued Shiite control over the security services. Although Washington had been pressing for the appointment of a Sunni Minister of Interior or Minister of Defense to reassure nervous Sunnis that they would not face the continued threat of Shiite death squads, the best that can be hoped for now is probably the appointment of a Kurdish or secular Shiite leader, such as former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, to one of these key security jobs.

As bad as the current situation is, it pales in comparison with the simultaneous uprisings in Fallujah and Najaf in 2004. But the first priority is to halt the bloodshed. The interim Iraqi government must take the lead on this, as the use of American troops without the backing of the Iraqi government would play into the hands of chauvinists on either side who argue that the U.S. has thrown its weight behind their rivals. American forces should play a supportive role in backing up the Iraqi Army and police, but should let them take the lead. Initial reports suggest that a curfew imposed today by the Iraqi government has dampened the violence.

The greater challenge will be to pull Iraqi factions back from the brink of a civil war.

As bad as the situation is, it is an opportunity to drive home the point that all factions would be worse off if Iraq plunges into civil war. Iraq would

not merely split into three pieces, as some have presumed, but into hundreds of pieces that would be plagued by endless terrorism and ethnic and sectarian cleansing.

The U.S. must use the latest crisis to press Sunni moderates to decisively break with Islamic extremists who seek to provoke the civil war that will severely hurt Sunni interests. The prospect of imminent civil war has actually increased American leverage with Sunni Iraqis. The New York Times reported today that Sunni Arabs who had called for the withdrawal of American forces from their territory before the recent upsurge in violence now are urging U.S. forces to stay put to stave off further violence.

The United States also must use the current crisis to persuade Shiite leaders that they are better off sharing power in a unified Iraq than seeking total power in a rump Shiite state that will fight endless battles against Iraqi Sunnis and foreign radicals.

In addition to setting back efforts to build an inclusive government, the recent violence has set back the Administration’s plans for gradually withdrawing American troops as Iraqi forces became stronger. But the violence also undercuts those who called for an early exit strategy by arguing that U.S. forces destabilize Iraq by exacerbating tensions. It is now clear that a continued American presence is needed to help avert a civil war, which is a greater threat to Iraq’s future than the insurgency.

The political-sectarian violence in Iraq puts the recent tempest in a teapot over the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in a new perspective. The real danger to Muslims is not satirical cartoons, but those who manipulate (and bomb) Islamic symbols for political ends and commit mass murder in the name of God.

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